

This Solution Proposes to be a Solution

Description

[Soylent](#) found or type unknown

The breakfast, lunch, and dinner of champions?

Hackers will hack anything.

Now there's a guy who has dissolved multivitamins, oat powder, whey protein, brown rice syrup, and other things in olive oil and water to make a solution that purports to completely replace the eating of meals. His name is Rob Rhinehart, and he's a *software engineer*, of all things. But that's hacker culture these days: it doesn't confine itself to code. Anything: [life](#), [design](#), [our brains](#), [gadgets](#), and even [human nutrition](#) are all things to be tinkered with, broken down, unlocked, re-engineered.

He calls it *Soylent*. He should have consulted a professional communicator first. I know which [Charlton Heston movie quote](#) is probably echoing in your mind right now, and the associations there aren't too positive. How about [Lembas](#)? Or [Mudder's Milk](#)? Those are some names with positive vibes and serious geek cred!

But I digress.

There's a bit of a debate about Soylent going on in my household. Well, not so much of a debate *per se*. More of an immediate acknowledgement between my wife and me that the whole idea is antithetical to her values and goals. She dreams—no, she *plans*—turning our little 7-acre ex-cow-pasture into a [permaculture edible forest](#). (*That's a compelling vision!*) It's about the relationship people have with food, she contends. For many living in our culture, there's a big disconnect about where our food comes from, and what it ought to mean to us. Reducing food to a homogeneous slurry takes that disconnect to its absurd extreme.

She makes a compelling case.

But a consultant was by our office recently, and he made the case that people working on global food security ought to be considering more than just the macronutrients. When people don't eat enough (i.e. enough calories), they die; when people don't eat *well* enough (i.e. proper nutrition), they get sick (and *eventually* die). What, he asks, are programs such as the kinds we manage doing to help people in developing countries be nutritionally secure?

One of the uses Rhinehart sees for Soylent is [helping fight world hunger](#). Now, if we were just to mass-produce a bunch of the stuff and ship it to developing countries, Soylent would be little different than [Plumpy'nut](#). Seems to me that we're not helping people's food security if they remain dependent on an international supply chain. But if, as he says, "Soylent can largely be produced from the products of local agriculture," perhaps someone ought to "hack" local agriculture systems to find what crops ought to be grown *in situ* to cost-efficiently meet people's nutritional needs. And, for that matter, if the crops

can be grown locally, why do they need to be turned into something like Soylent before they're consumed? Maybe they could be turned into something more like "dinner."

Well, in a sense, that's exactly what our work looks like to me. We go to a place, we see how they farm there, and we try different things. When we find things that seem to work on our test plots, we show them to local farmers.

Maybe my wife and I can hack our little plot. What food-production systems are appropriate to the southern end of the Blue Ridge Mountains that, taken together, would meet the nutritional needs of two adults? How can those systems be managed so as to continuously improve our little plot's capacity to produce food? What combination of systems produces those macro- and micro-nutrients most cost- and labor-efficiently? How can we experience the most joy in the production and consumption of healthy food?

There must be a spreadsheet for that. Maybe we can make one.

Category

1. Republished from Compass at OIRED

Date Created

July 22, 2013

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